

Saturday morning a week ago, a drizzle moistened the sidewalk at the ranch. All was still. Not a twig moved on the old mulberry tree in front of the house. Breaking the hush, a low rumble changed to claps of thunder on into the smashing cracks of a billion volts of lightning.

The electricity blinked in the kitchen, otherwise the tension listening for rain may have caused a drouth spasm to lock my eyelids shut. Moments later the wind swept in a rain hard enough to be audible on a thick composition roof.

It fell fast enough on the tin rain gutters to chorus a song we used to sing on rainy mornings in the bunkhouse at the old ranch: "Rattle, rattle, shine up the boots and polish the belt buckles; park the feed wagon and turn out the night horse. Be on the asphalt before the draws come down and the gaps wash over. Be in the Wool Capitol when they turn on the lights."

My opening thanks at the first drops always goes the same. I shut up my eyes and say, "Oh Heavenly Father, please bring us rain. Please bring deep soil moisture to relieve the misery of all your misguided children, but please help the ones of us who can't be cured of ranching and farming. Amen."

Next, I unplugged the computer and the cordless phone, muttering all the time a deprecation of the local weather station: "Oh yes, you purveyors of mad hatter news and hollow forecasts, how do like this Saturday morning flood you

predicted to be less than a 20 percent chance of scattered showers?" A pause: "You must mean you have a 20 percent batting average. Had Noah listened to weather reports, his ark would have floated off without man or beast aboard."

For the longest time, I stood in the front door staring at the pools of water forming between the house and barn. Wave after wave of heavy showers followed a healing drizzle. As is always true of the Divide in stormy weather, thunderbolts shook the ground and rattled the window panes.

Twice I checked Granny's quilting box under my bed to free up space. I am not afraid of storms, but I have to be cautious about lightning to be sure my metal-rimmed bifocals and hearing aids are grounded. If electricity starts jumping from one to the other, it'll cause an eye twitch the best doctors at Mayo's Clinic can't cure.

In the next 18 hours, anywhere from one to three inches fell on the shortgrass country. We measured an inch-nine in a gauge over on the highway that hadn't caught much more than spider webs in the past seven years. Keeping a glass tube pointed skyward for seven years to catch two tenths of rain every 90 days takes either a devoted scientist studying the formation of deserts, or a hopeless herder dead bent on staying broke.

By 1993, the smokiest skywriter to ever spell out *Drink Pepsi Cola* could not have made the forecasts clearer in the empty skies. But as late as last fall, we were still running

a few sheep on country where we should have been taking up the salt troughs, turning off the windmills, and locking the gates.

Two months ago, I started calling one rancher a week, hoping to divert their minds from the gloom of the drouth and the market failures. Of the first five I contacted, three were on canes or walkers. The remaining two had had the flu from Christmas and still sounded like a wind-up phonograph on low speed.

In every instance, the physical review lasted three minutes and the weather and market report consumed the rest of the time. One old boy had been in the hospital in serious condition the week before. He was worried because a few of his bigger calves had developed the white scours while he was in the hospital.

However, I ended up contributing to the very problem I hoped to solve. One guy I called was a neighbor wintering in Laredo working for an oil company until conditions improved up here. First thing he reported was how thankful he was he had passed a physical for a company insurance plan the day before.

Next, he asked how I was. Before I thought, I told him about the dreadful wool market and the big cow outfit north of us going into recreation ranching, meaning more coyotes were going to be drifting south. He interrupted me in the

middle of the news of Mamie Lee's Beauty Shop closing because cellular phones make gossiping so easy.

"Gosh-a-mighty," he said, "I'm glad you didn't call before my physical, or my blood pressure would of thrown me in a high risk pool. I'll call later, goodbye."

Now we have had rain, I won't have to be an angel of mercy. My neighbor in Laredo must not have heard of the rains as he hasn't called for a report. Be best, I think, to wait until he calls me. He sounded pretty upset hanging up the phone.